

M406

THE RULER OF NATIONS:

A S E R M O N

OCCASIONED BY

THE DEATH OF PRESIDENT LINCOLN.

BY THE


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THE RULER OF NATIONS.

“THAT MEN MAY KNOW THAT THOU WHOSE NAME ALONE IS JEHOVAH ART THE MOST HIGH OVER ALL THE EARTH.”—*Psalms* lxxxiii. 18.

I DEPART from the course of exposition this morning because divine providence has chosen for me another subject. Every one must perceive a Voice calling the civilised world to attention ; and it is best to wait reverently for its instruction. All men can denounce, easily and justly, the baseness of assassination ; can moralise, not without advantage, on the manner in which war unhinges the intellect and exasperates evil passions ; and can speculate, also, on the political results which may follow so unexpected a catastrophe ; but it is the special province of the Christian Ministry to point out the connection of such events with God, to exhibit them in their highest and permanent bearings, and to urge home their application to the character and the daily life.

This verse is the crowning sentiment of an ancient war-song of the Hebrews. In many of these compositions there is, undoubtedly, what seems very like a wrathful and revengeful tone ; but it must be remembered that a long education was necessary to bring the world to admire—it has not even yet imbibed—the merciful spirit which animates the instructions of Jesus Christ ; and it must also be remembered that this people filled an office which no other people ever occupied, in which they acted as the commissioned ministers of Divine wrath. Their legitimate wars were undertaken by Divine

authority, and had for their chief object the recognition of the universal supremacy of Jehovah. It is impossible not to be struck with this high moral purpose in all the writings of the Old Testament. If you compare the histories written by Christians in the most advanced Christian times, with those penned by Jews in the patriarchal and Levitical ages, you will not fail to be impressed with the much more uniform reference of everything, on the part of the sacred writers, to the agency of God. There is, perhaps, no fact which, through the unthoughtfulness and earthliness of our nature, requires to be more frequently impressed upon us than that He is as closely connected as ever He was with the affairs of men and of nations ; that He is daily carrying forward His work of instruction, correction, and renovation, in events which, to the sealed eye, appear totally devoid of meaning. We therefore cannot question that the grand design of the occurrences to which I am about to allude is, "that men may know that He whose name alone is Jehovah is the Most High over all the earth."

I.

WE MIGHT, IN PASSING, POINT FOR EVIDENCE OF THIS GENERAL TRUTH EVEN TO THE MAINTENANCE OF THE NATURAL WORLD.

It is difficult to imagine how any one endowed with reason could ever have looked out upon this universe and not have concluded that it was the work of a Divine Creator. Whether we turn our attention to the worlds which move in space around us, or to the constitution of this one world of our own, it is impossible not to perceive that they are the issues of a vaster power and a more comprehensive wisdom than ever belonged to man. Not less clear is it that He who made them lives in them. That they are conducted under

general laws is admitted ; but a law is not a power, and in this case the term can mean no more than a uniform mode of action. That those laws are invariable in their operation proves only the perfect foresight of the Creator, who did not need to ascertain the best methods by experiment, but at once adopted the courses which have never needed to be changed.

The Bible, with that charming union of reverence and simplicity with which it speaks of God, presents Him as the continual director of all the processes of nature. It is He who, according to this book, "raiseth the stormy deep," and He who "stilleth the noise of its waves." It is He who sendeth forth the cold of winter, and He who, in spring, "reneweth the face of the earth." It is He who "giveth the young lions their food," who "knoweth all the fowls of the mountains, and whatsoever passeth through the paths of the sea." And, finely, are we referred to this universal power and presence as a source of consolation. "Thou forgettest," says Isaiah, "the Lord thy Maker, that hath stretched forth the heavens and laid the foundations of the earth, and hast feared continually, every day, because of the fury of the oppressor, as if he were ready to destroy." Amos, too, exclaims with equal truthfulness and poetry :—"Seek Him that maketh the Seven Stars and Orion, and turneth the shadow of death into the morning, and maketh the day dark with night : that calleth for the waters of the sea and poureth them out upon the face of the earth ; the Lord is His name, that strengtheneth the spoiled against the strong."—Isaiah li., 13; Amos v. 8.

Were there nothing but the heavens declaring the glory of God, and the firmament shewing His handiwork—day unto day uttering speech, and night unto night showing knowledge—

men might "know that He whose name alone is Jehovah is the Most High over all the earth."

II.

THIS IS MORE FORCIBLY IMPRESSED UPON US BY THE CONFLICT PROCEEDING IN THE WORLD WITH MORAL EVIL.

Superficial observers suppose that there is no distinction made in this life between the righteous and the wicked, but that it fares quite as well with the one class as with the other. It is true that the objects of moral government require that for the present the good and the bad should be commingled, and that the final judgment, in which both shall receive according to their works, should be postponed; but there are, nevertheless, even in the present condition of things, indubitable symptoms of the rule of a just God.

Does not the very constitution of our minds make it more advantageous to us to be virtuous than to be vicious? Do not men who pursue an upright line of conduct merely from expediency secure a proportionate benefit,—and, whenever they imbibe the principles from which such conduct springs legitimately, do they not acquire the "peace which passeth all understanding?"

It is clear from the light which the Old Testament throws upon the principles on which nations are governed, that they come under the same rule as individuals—that they are everywhere damaged by iniquity and prospered by fidelity,—that "righteousness exalteth a nation, and sin is a reproach to any people." When, on one occasion, Asa, one of the kings of Judah, had recourse to a mode of protecting his territories which implied distrust of God and an ungrateful forgetfulness of former deliverances at His hand, a prophet was sent to say to him:—

“ Herein hast thou done foolishly ; therefore, from henceforth, thou shalt have wars”—and, although “ the King was wroth with the seer, and cast him into prison” for being the bearer of such a message, yet “ WARS”—that concentration of all calamities to a people—did for that moral departure, come upon him (1 Chron. xvi.)

It is not for us to sit as interpreters of Divine judgments, and pronounce one nation more guilty than another because it is so scourged. To settle a question of that kind it is not enough to look at particular acts, for the quality of an act, viewed in the light of divine law, is one thing: the guilt of those who perform it quite another. Before coming to a correct conclusion on such a point we should have to weigh the complicated influences to which nations are subject: the influence of their history, the influence of their laws, the influence of their social prejudices and the measure of their knowledge; and who is equal to such an investigation but the one Omniscient and Infallible Judge? Neither should we conclude that the freedom of certain nations, for a time, from great inflictions is a proof of their comparative innocence; for, in this as in other cases, “ judgment” often “ begins at the house of God,” and the more faithful are chastened while the less faithful are reserved for future treatment. It was very strikingly revealed to Abraham (Gen. xv. 13) that his posterity should serve in a foreign land, and be afflicted for four hundred years,—and “ afterward,” the Lord added, “ AFTERWARD ” “ that nation whom they shall serve will I judge.” Even more remarkable and suggestive of much that is truly solemn are the indications which we have of God withholding judgments from wicked nations because their wickedness had gone too far for correction. They were let alone,

while perhaps their neighbours envied their wealth and splendour, but it was because they were fit only for extirpation! The Israelites' entrance into Canaan, with the exterminating sword, was postponed for these four hundred years, perhaps, for several reasons, but certainly for this one, pronounced by the Eternal himself to his listening servant:—"The iniquity of the Ammonites is not YET full." When it was full they were not purified but destroyed. "How unsearchable are His judgments, and His ways past finding out!"

It certainly may be regarded as a sign of mercy to a people that the judgments of God descend upon its crimes while there is yet time to turn from them. It is, I think, neither presumptuous to believe that a great national sin brought down the lightnings of civil war on America, nor rash to predict that the result will be its perpetual separation from that iniquity. It surely was impossible that four millions of men should have been held as property, under laws of all but incredible injustice, by a nation possessed of the knowledge of Christianity, and after the respectful remonstrances, sustained by the unequivocal example, of other peoples, and not incur the displeasure of the moral Ruler of mankind. Reflecting men among themselves had for years, with dread, predicted such a convulsion. The avalanche was expected to move whenever the finger of God should touch it; but who among mortals foresaw the horrors of its course? In the beginning of the conflict neither combatant would look in the direction of its real cause, nor take any steps towards its removal. The one clung to it as the spring of its civil life; the other maintained, justly, perhaps, with reference to national law, but falsely with reference to that Divine law which overrules every other, that it was not bound

nor even permitted to interfere with its existence. So long as these positions were maintained—on the assumption that the design of God was the nation's purification—the war could not cease; nor did it cease. From small beginnings it grew more fierce and terrible. The desolations of the first year were doubled in the second, and those of the second were doubled in the third. The heart of the people, though then more serious and more advanced in its perception of God's meaning, had not perfectly turned to justice. The fourth year came—came with weapons of war more destructive than the world before knew; with armies more numerous and scarcely less fierce than ever desolated the fields of pagan times; with prisons and hospitals choked with pining and dying men; with the populations of great cities driven out to perish of hunger and broken hearts; and with ten thousand homes bereft of fathers and brothers, and haunted only by red-eyed women and dispirited children!

It was in the midst of these desolations that the representatives of the people in Congress met and determined that the national constitution should be so altered as that SLAVERY SHOULD THENCEFORTH BE FOR EVER ILLEGAL WITHIN THE DOMINIONS OF THE UNITED STATES. From that time the tide turned. By a series of startling military operations the power of the enemy was broken. Its chief army surrendered, and the morning of peace stole over the central mountains. Had not events been so ordained "that all men might know that Thou whose name alone is Jehovah art the Most High over all the earth?"

III.

THIS TRUTH IS TAUGHT STILL FARTHER BY THE MANNER IN WHICH THE MOST DISTINGUISHED INSTRUMENTS OF DIVINE POWER ARE CHOSEN AND LAID ASIDE.

It is the object of the entire system of God's providence to

fix the attention of man upon Himself; for until the creature stands in his just relation to the Creator he cannot be happy. It is in harmony with this purpose that He has often selected as agents for great enterprises persons who were judged by themselves and by others naturally unfit for those tasks. When He wanted a deliverer of His people out of the hands of their oppressors in Egypt, where did He find him? Hidden on the shore of the Nile. When He wanted a king of right spirit to reign over that people in the land of promise, where was he discovered? In the sheepfolds of Judah. And when He required men to be the companions of His Son in this world, and who, after He left this world, should go forth to warn its princes, to overthrow its idolatries, and to diffuse happiness among its suffering masses, He drew them from among men of moral and industrious habits, but of slender education and lowly origin. Why? That the world might be as little as possible tempted to attribute to man the power which belongeth to God only.

Equally observable is the manner in which He disposes of these men after he has found them. The most powerful of those apostles was a man compassed with infirmity, of weak presence, and in speech said to be contemptible, carrying his divine treasure in a body brittle as a vessel of earthenware. That King of Israel became the darling of the nation, the sweet psalmist of the church; but that the people might not carry their adulation to excess, he was allowed, not without deep and instructive penitence, to descend to the grave with a blighted moral name. The first leader and legislator—one of the greatest intellects of the ancient world—was not allowed to enter the land of promise, but died in his full strength, with his natural force unabated, and the glorious country, for which he

had sighed and laboured from his youth, spread out before him. Snatched suddenly from the people, who, having too much trusted him towards the close of his life, might have turned his tomb into a scene of idolatrous reverence, "the Lord buried him in a valley in the land of Moab, over against Bethpeor; but no man knoweth of his sepulchre unto this day."

These biblical instances have had many counterparts in modern history, and among them I think I trace the man whose tragic death now thrills the civilised world. He passes across the field of history as if heaven-sent. This, of course, does not imply his personal perfection, nor even the justice of his public measures. Nations seldom receive rulers in great advance of themselves. Every one in such a position is, to a large extent, the impersonation of his country's principles, and the creature of his times. But who does not discern "certain vital signs" in this person indicating a higher than human commission? Though born to hard labour, and gifted with no more early education than was necessary to enable him to read the Bible to his mother, he rose by application, industry, and self-culture to a condition in which he could benefit mankind. I look back now with deeper ponderings than before to the farewell he took of the primitive people among whom he had passed his youth, when on his way to the Presidency of the United States. If you see a man entering on new duties in a spirit of boasting, or of levity, expect nothing from him; but if you see him weighted with responsibility, distrusting his own powers, inclined rather to exaggerate than to underrate the work before him, hope much. "No man," were the words used on that occasion, "since Washington, has had a harder

task than that which lies before me. I can do nothing without the help of God: I therefore beg you will pray for me ;” and the crowd, touched by his artless earnestness, responded simply but sublimely, “ We will pray for you.” Thus girded, he went to meet the undisclosed mystery of those terrible years.

This man we, in England, saw through mists of prejudice. That was, to a great extent, unavoidable ; for public men, in times of extreme party spirit, are not readily known. But the progress of events gradually unveiled him. His public utterances, though not clothed in polished language, were marked by independent thought, by great sagacity, and by an air of noble simplicity which won both confidence and attention. His moderation was almost singular. There were two or three junctures at which a fatal breach with England appeared inevitable ; the storm of indignation in public journals and assemblies seemed to have risen to the point at which control is impossible. But as soon as the decision of the President became known it was found to be marked by justice and dignity, and the tumult changed instantly into a dead calm. In the same spirit were those letters written, doubtless under his influence, which demanded the surrender of the Virginian army, and gave it leave, in the hour of its almost absolute helplessness, to retire, each man to his home, simply on his word of honour. Touching it is to learn that he “ spoke very kindly” of that conquered General on the morning of the day on which he died.

And is this man dead ? Is this hard-won experience gone from his country ? The trained intelligence, the chastened resentments, the knowledge of men, the social weight arising from four years,—and four such years—of tested integrity, are they all gone ? Yes ; they are gone. And who will fill his

place? He who sent him, and who, when His work was done, took him away—He will fill his place. The world is His, and not ours. We may in due time understand His intentions in this act, and already goodness appears in it. Did ever the death of a foreign ruler affect England as this has done? Did ever intelligence of such an event so quickly fill municipal halls throughout the land with mourners in all conditions of life, and of all shades of political opinion? Did ever Peers or Commons enter on the work of condolence with less formality and with more real emotion? An event which thus rises above all ranks, all parties, all countries, touching the common heart of humanity, and arousing the dormant brotherhood of the race, is a universal blessing. We are ourselves the richer for our sympathy. Shall not they on whom we lavish it be enriched too? Will it not soothe their spirit to learn how instantaneously we have made their grief our own? Sympathy has frequently softened hearts which sorrow has hardened. Love has turned to mercy those whom misfortune was prompting to revenge. It may be that such balm was needed in this instance; that the poison of a fierce war required such an antidote at this particular crisis!

If all countries are to be thus strangely united in the work of peace, we shall gratefully recognise the arrangement as one of Infinite goodness; but if it should not be so, the American people will yet have before them an emphatic call to fix their supreme attention on Him who liveth for ever. They have been bitterly taught the transiency of wealth, of honour, and of life in all ranks; and now, by a mode even more horrifying than battle, they have seen wisdom, discretion, patience, and self-command, with all the high qualities of a trusted ruler, wrenched from them

in an instant. They will not be losers but gainers, if they hear, as the interpretation of that event, those words of the Lord—
 “Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, neither let the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches; but let him that glorieth glory in this, that he UNDERSTANDETH AND KNOWETH ME; that I am the Lord which exercise loving kindness, judgment, and righteousness in the earth; for in these things do I delight saith the Lord (Jer. ix. 23 and 24.)

To every one of us it is an object of inexpressible importance to have the friendship of Him who is the “Most High over all the earth.” To live in violation of His laws or to be secretly disaffected towards Him, is as full of peril as it is of injustice; for there is no place which can conceal from His eye, no means of securing independence of His power, no spring of happiness but in Himself. But who can compute the value of reconciliation to Him, of liberty to converse with Him, of the assurance that He is our Father through the mediation of His Son Jesus Christ; for then we are free of the universe; “all things are ours;” triumph and disaster, life and death, “work together for good.” There can be no real calamity, as there is already “no condemnation, to them that are in Christ Jesus, which walk not after the flesh but after the spirit.”

PEMBROKE CHAPEL,

Sunday Morning, 30th April, 1865.

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